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Spatial Poetics: Control of Time and Space in Graphic Narratives

Abstract

Deceptively simple on the surface, under close analysis the comic strip page is something of a paradox, a complex and multi-layered structure. For the artist, the formative layout of a graphic narrative is both a conceptual and spatial activity, involving a high degree of reasoning in the selection and placement of any textual and visual elements. In reception, the effectiveness of any narrative depends on the readiness of the reader to recognize, synthesize and decode the linguistic and visual information at hand, in short: to navigate spatial relationships and make meaningful connections between one panel and the next in the strip sequence. For this reason, graphic narratives offer up tremendous potential for textual analysis: for studying at close quarters issues pertaining to spatial design, visual literacy and the breach between expression and readership. This paper will address the formal and spatial apparatus of the printed comic book from a predominately western perspective, with reference to selected American and European theorists and practitioners, focusing on i) page composition and spatial orientation, ii) the dynamic between text and image, iii) the utilization of panels as temporal markers and iv) connoting a sense of socio-geographical setting.

For the purpose of this paper the term 'graphic narrative' refers specifically to anthologized print collections of comic strip stories and one-off graphic novels; as opposed to storyboards, illustrated stories, info-graphics and other published or printed ephemera. Historically, academic study has tended towards framing the comic strip as a narrative form with "limited intellectual accomplishment" (Eisner, 1996:3), often associated with a proto-stage of reading or contextualized within the narrow confines of the superhero set. Thankfully, this attitude no longer prevails. Currently, western comic book scholarship is a vibrant, albeit still emerging field, located in keynote American universities and the Francophone school of semiotic discourse. In Britain, the post-war boom of the printed weekly strip pamphlet (see Sabin, 1996:44-91) may be long past but the 'graphic novel', an entire strip narrative in book form, currently appears to be enjoying a healthy flush of visibility and respectability. In the case of the former, a burgeoning information economy, and more specifically, a penchant for screen-based, interactive social narrative and game-play amongst younger readers in the 7 to 14 age bracket has led to a decline in circulation (witness the decision taken in 2012 by publishers D.C.Thompson, to move the *Dandy* comic to an online version only). Although difficult to categorize, it can be argued that the audience for the graphic novel is comprised of a different demographic or community of readers: adult, male-centric but not exclusively so, culturally aware with a visual sensibility that still prizes the physicality of the printed object over the digitized copy. The latest graphical works; often combining lush production values, complex character driven narratives and underscored with diverse sociopolitical themes, are just as likely to be reviewed in the broadsheet press as they are a scholarly journal.

In contemplating the current relevance of the sequential form, there is a further dimension worth touching on here. There are clear parallels between the navigation of the printed artifact or the fragmentary narratives contained between the margins, and the digital sphere, that resonates with a contemporary media-savvy audience. In an age dominated by new media forms and multi-modal ways of experiencing narrative, any discussion of the

term 'reading' that seeks to equate literacy with text-only formats seems increasingly antiquated. Eisner's comment on the perceived criticism of the strip format by a (unspecified) literary intelligentsia signals a pedagogical framework that is no longer tenable. According to some, the predominance of the digital has led to a profound re-evaluation of the "balance between word and image" (Harris, 2006:213), shifting the literacy debate away from the purely verbal or alphabetical. In respect to readership, contemporary structural analysis of strip narratives challenges "long-held hierarchical notions of what constitutes appropriate discourse" (Hoover, 2012:177).

In part, there are idiosyncratic features associated with the strip medium that may explain previous academic resistance. It is, undeniably, easier to paraphrase a cinematic sequence or a passage in a novel than it is to describe the surface 'clunkiness' of a page of graphic fiction, largely because the viewing or reading experience is plurivectorial. The reader is constantly traversing and rewinding across the page, from panel to panel, to retrieve the information necessary to propel the story onwards. Deviation from the prescribed route laid out by the author is also a common occurrence; the direction of eye movement can be erratic, often moving ahead in a sequence or arresting on a choice aesthetic detail. Seasoned comic book artists are aware of these anomalies and will either design around or incorporate them into the narrative structure. Secondly, the imaged surface on the graphic page represents only a portion of the narrative content. The negative space, at the margins or between panel frames, functions as a surrogate for the omitted or undisclosed parts. It is into this latent space that the reader must enter, in their imagination, to fashion a coherent whole of the story. With regard to readership, there are other factors to consider too. Strip narratives come with a readymade iconographical system, a lexicon of graphic signifiers (panel, text containers, pictograms, onomatopoeia symbols etc), which are self-referential and require some prior knowledge of their usage and application. Lastly, most (but not all) comic books are a hybrid of verbal and pictorial elements. The correlation between text and image creates the tension on which the narrative depends, which at a semantic level presents a

fascinating conundrum; do we *read* or *view* the comic book page? Which do we prioritize first, text or image?

Comic books may be awkward to describe yet paradoxically have a reputation for being easy to read. However, the apparent expediency in their reception belies an underlying complexity. Defined by Umberto Eco as an "autonomous literary subgenre" (Eco 1987:25), comic books have evolved over time into a highly efficient medium for telling stories. Eco's contradictory phrase signals both a decoupling from *and* link to other visual narrative forms, as well as aptly illustrating that strip narratives defy such casual definition. To scholars of the western tradition, an agreed upon, catchall definition that encapsulates the form, whilst acknowledging historical staging posts and contemporary nuances is elusive and ultimately self-defeating (see Meskin, 2007). Some theoreticians, essentially formalist in approach, have sought to move beyond the definitional project and look at the component parts that most graphic narratives have in common; the amalgam of formal rules, the economy of two dimensional space and the breakdown of narrative action and narration.

1: 0 *the architecture of the page*

In respect to any formal analysis, it is useful to start out by opening up the architecture of the comic book page, the grid structure that governs the page layout. In *The System of Comics* (2007), Thierry Groensteen encourages the reader to imagine the 'contentless' comic; the page emptied of its iconic and textual innards, leaving only the skeleton of panel frames and balloon outlines that comprise what he calls 'the spatio-topical system' (Groensteen, 2007:24). Under Groensteen's impressively forensic gaze the page 'multiframe' is unpacked as a series of interrelated frames within frames; text boxes and balloons, panel frames, strips, hyperframe, page margin, single page and double-page, eventually expanding out to include the whole book, the ultimate multiframe or the grand sum of all frames (2007:27-39).

This appreciation of page design exemplifies the panoply of choices open to the comic book creator at the outset of a project and confirms the complexity of the spatial operation at hand. Each drawn panel frame has a relation not only to abutting panels, but to other frames in the network; in particular the

hyperframe, the boundary separating the assembly of panels (or usable space) from the page margin. Additionally, each panel frame occupies a designated site and area on the page, directly affecting the "the range of possibilities" (2007:92) for surrounding frames. The configuration of the page is outlined in geometric terms, as a framework of contours, although to fully appreciate the impact of the design it is necessary to factor in panel content and styling. It is also important to note that the site of textual reception is not bound by a discrete measure from page surface to the readers gaze. Just as the eye can move erratically *across* a page, it may also telescope in and out, taking in the whole page in one moment and alighting on a single panel detail in the next. In this way, spatially, it is possible to contemplate the schemata of the printed page (or the double-page spread) extending out towards the viewer in three dimensions.

At mid-distance or arms length the page is viewed in its entirety. At this distance, at the level of the page, the reader may register that there is a commonality in the constituent parts or note the division of the multiframe. Fig. 1 shows page 16 from the *Curse of the Molemen* story, taken from a Fantagraphics anthology of *Big Baby* stories by the artist Charles Burns. At the level of the page certain motifs are clearly visible, notably the broadly symmetrical composition which scans like a pyramidal altarpiece with the balloon in the second panel marking the apex. Also detectable is the chiaroscuro design; the stark arrangement of black and white areas, the thickness of the border and gutters and patterns of negative spaces left by the speech balloons. At this distance, the untrammelled gaze of the reader moves freely and does not necessarily follow the predetermined trail of narrative set by the artist. For example; looking again at the *Molemen* page, we may register the L shape pattern of character close-ups that comprise the left hand side and bottom strip of the page or observe the oppositional lines of perspective on the window and garden landscaping in panels four to seven.

The second viewing stage concerns the way that panels are grouped together into horizontal bands or *strips*. At the level of the strip the reader becomes more conscious of the aesthetic qualities of the artwork. It is at this juncture

that the reader may adopt the learned behaviour (at least in western culture) of mentally routing sequences left to right, top to bottom and correlations between panels will begin to motion the narrative. In the *Molemen* sequence directional flow is immediately established, as the light from the open doorway in panel one is shown on Tony's bedspread in panel two.

Additionally, artists will often utilise the strip as an intermediate unit in the unfolding narrative, a brief hiatus in the reading function to denote an *ellipse* in the action or shift in location (2007:58). The *Big Baby* page is comprised of three strips that dissect the page into horizontal thirds. Burns uses the natural metre of the strip to cut back and forth between the character of Tony and the subterranean creature (the moleman) climbing out of the empty swimming pool.

Focusing closer still, it is at the level of the panel that arguably the reader is most engaged in the visual and textual content, tucked into the internal rhythm of the narrative. The panel is the basic unit in any strip sequence, seen in a chain (or composite strips) with other panels and has a dual function; as image container and temporal marker. For a variety of logistical reasons - demarcation of positive and negative space, internal rhythm and ease of re-drafting - panels tend to be (but are not exclusively) right-angled quadrilaterals. The panel contents are enclosed by the panel frame which in turn is separated from adjoining panels by the gutter; a calibrated negative space that divides the page into the aforementioned grid design. The gutter may be voided, un-drawn space but cognitively it signals the site of transition between one panel and the next (Scott McCloud has some ideas on this that will be explored later).

In respect to mapping out the page, there are certain coordinates on the grid that assume more significance than others do, in particular; entry and exit points and the geographical centre. Experienced artists such as Burns tend to utilise these positions to punctuate the narrative, to highlight dramatic peaks in the story structure. Seen over a number of pages, the correlation of keynote panels with prominent sites on the page has the accumulative effect of instilling a formulaic orderliness, a rise and fall tempo in the mediation of

events. In the *Molemen* extract, the panels that occupy the privileged spots (top left and bottom right) serve to bookend the sequence signalling the entry point (in this case literally, as Tony's Mom is opening the door) and cliff-hanger, or exit to the next page. The central panel is negated to favour the looping mechanism of the strip.

This sequence embodies Burns' diligent approach to spatial design and the partitioning of the page. Throughout the entire *Curse of the Molemen* story, Burns opts for a functional and uncluttered layout with consistent geometrical panel framing. There is little deviation from the three-strip structure, the majority of pages containing between five and seven panels. Indeed, there is only one point in the narrative where the neutrality of panel division is compromised, which happens in a double-page sequence where the panel frames morph into the television screen (Burns, 2007:24-25). The 'transmitted' dialogue emanating from the horror feature that Tony is watching is placed above and outside the panel frames which has the effect of drawing attention to the disembodied words spoken by the TV characters whilst indicating that their source is elsewhere, out of scene. For Burns, neutrality equals readability. His approach to page layout, consistently reinforced throughout the *Moleman* narrative, encourages the reader to bypass the homogeneous grid structure and focus in at the level of the panel. However, as Hignite suggests, it is also possible to argue the opposite; that Burns' approach to image making, so "flawless as to visually confound the source" (Hignite, 2006:104), can appear to amplify the signification of the design.

An alternative approach to layout can be found in *How to Draw Comics The Marvel Way* (1986), in which Stan Lee and John Buscema advocate page structures that are shaped by or accentuate character actions, body language or the rapport between several characters. By way of example, a page that depicts a rooftop fistfight between *Spiderman* and the *Silver Surfer*, is composed to exaggerate the spectacle and the shifting power dynamic between the two combatants (Lee & Buscema, 1986:133). In layouts of this type, panel dimensions are frequently determined by representations of the

expressive body and the reader is encouraged to view the page primarily at the visceral level of the image. Alternatively, page layouts dominated by body text or where the linguistic content has primacy are less common. Panel sequences that demand a close meditation on the written word over image content tend to either betray their prose origins or else have a predominately expository function. I'm thinking here of strip adaptations of literary works or alternatively collaborative pieces between a writer and artist where the authorial voice is key; say, for example, some of the strip monologues from *American Splendor* by Harvey Pekar and various artists, notably Robert Crumb (see Pekar et al, 1986:45-46).

Spatially, the network of balloons and/or narrative boxes forms a distinct yet peripheral pattern of flat spaces within the image artifice. Text containers effectively cover surplus parts of the panel image not necessary to character or narrative development. They may also extend out of the panel frame, breaking the 'fourth wall' to dramatic effect or, alternatively, may be employed as a linking device between panels. Their size, frequency and placement directly influences eye movement and narrative flow. The positioning of the text balloon within the panel is an integral part of the design, judged carefully in relation to the character that is speaking (or thinking), the panel frame and adjacent balloons. As can be seen, the verbal text has a contributory but secondary role in the *Big Baby* sequence. Note the relative proportion of the balloon in comparison to the panel image, that the balloons are clipped at the panel edges and how the long tails on the speech balloons do not interfere with the reader's expansive view of the scene. Moreover, the third person narration (in the text boxes which slightly overlap the top edge of the first and third panels in the first strip), adds only minimal information in respect to setting the scene.

It is clear that the central function of the page architecture is *control* - the removal of ambiguity - over the creation and reception of the narrative. Furthermore, page design is a principal hallmark of the artist's style and preferences, indicative of the value placed on spatial parameters, the corroboration of narrative flow with reader direction and the convergence of

text and image. At the experimental end of the spectrum, there are creators who test the practical limitations of the page with inventive configurations of the multiframe. Chris Ware's *Acme Novelty Library* is a fine example, an ongoing periodical (first published 1993), that serves as a showcase for his most audacious and playful layout digressions, some of which have manifested into fully-fledged graphic creations. His recent *Building Stories* publication (Ware, 2012) confounds the traditional novel format (or grand multiframe) with a portfolio set of broadsheets, booklets, comics and posters - separate parts but with interconnecting narratives. Ware has a high-concept approach to page design, drawing upon an encyclopaedic knowledge of the comic strip to create sequences which are often non-linear and rhythmically dense, described as possessing a "staggering architectonic filigree" (Hignite, 2006:228). Reading a Ware narrative can feel disorientating as the conventional readership function is often disturbed, re-routing the reader through unfamiliar, zonal pathways.

Other artists have a more decorative take on layout, transforming the page into ostentatious display. David Mack's *Kabuki: The Alchemy part nine* (2007) for example, dispenses with the regular panel matrix altogether, utilising the page as a freeform canvas to dazzling effect. In *Kabuki*, the narrative is schematically directed through the selection and juxtaposition of meta-images, photomontage, panel sequences, diagrammatic snippets and reoccurring visual motifs. Typically though, the transformation of the multiframe in layouts of this type tend to beguile the reader at the level of the page and consequentially, may affect the internal mechanism of the panel or the "reader's captivity to the rhythm" (Groensteen, 2007:60).

2:0 panels as controllers of time and space

Such is the predominance of a cinematic code of visualisation within contemporary culture, that the eye and the camera lens have become almost synonymous conceptually. In seeking to make sense of a world where complexity is the abiding narrative; personal experience, memory, unconscious thought and how we interact spatially with our surroundings are often mediated and relayed internally or externally using an optical film

syntax. An overview of American syndicated comic strips (especially the thriller and adventure genre) would reveal they have developed in tandem with the Hollywood film since the mid 1930's onwards. Early strip luminaries, such as Milton Caniff and Will Eisner, developed a canny eye for filmic shorthand and understanding of the audience predilection for screen imagery and plot lines; adopting cinematic cues such as montage, shots and viewpoints, editing shifts and character types into the strip medium. The same mid-century American newspaper strips and pulp comic books, especially those espousing teen romance, science fiction and schlock horror storylines, form much of the base material for Burns' graphic work (Hignite, 2006:107). In this context, *Curse of the Molemen* reads as an alien invasion cautionary tale appropriating the iconography of a 1950's B-movie. Except, filtered through Burns' severe-edged graphic, which effectively nullifies the camp flimsiness of the original, it becomes a much more disquieting experience.

Whilst it may be tempting to equate the comic panel with the still-frame or cinematic shot, cognitively and temporally they signify different things. The cinematic shot, which has a duration which runs from one edit to the next and is contained by a constant (ultimately) projected ratio, signals a definite passage of time. In contrast, the duration of time for a single comic strip panel and frame is unfixed and depends on a number of determinants including; panel shape and dimensions, the expressive rendering of the panel image and frame, the volume of accompanying text and the compatibility between one panel and the next.

The partitioning of time in a comic book is generated through the rhythmic chain of panels and strips. Eisner writes tellingly in *Comics and Sequential Art*, sampling from his own back catalogue of *Spirit* stories, how the shaping of panels in a sequence can help circumscribe the tempo, speeding up for thin vertical panels and slowing down for fat horizontals (Eisner, 1990:31-37). However, any panel can only indicate an approximate temporal measure because of its transitional nature. In Scott McCloud's pioneering text *Understanding Comics*, the author deliberates on the notion of *closure* in

comic strips and in particular, the role of the gutter as a transitional device between panels (McCloud, 1994:62-66). McCloud argues that time lapses in strip sequences can (to a certain extent) be quantified, classified and directly related to the readers ability to construct a unifying whole across the interspaces of the gutter, from the visual content in two or three neighbouring panels. McCloud marks out a set of six transition models, applicable to most graphic sequences. To briefly summarize each in turn; *moment-to-moment* transitions denote tiny increments of time [literally seconds] between panels. *Action-to-action* sequences trace the separate actions of a character in one scene. *Subject-to-subject* transitions cut between different characters [or objects] in the same abiding scene or location. *Scene-to-Scene* transitions indicate a change of location, which may involve considerable temporal or geographical displacement between one panel and the next. The point of an *aspect-to-aspect* sequence is primarily one of scene setting. Temporally the narrative is paused to allow the artist to highlight elements that are important to the mise-en-scene. Finally, there is the *non-sequitur* where there appears to be no discernible link in the textual and image content between one panel and the next (1994:70-72).

With the exception of the aspect-to-aspect category that obviates any forward momentum in the narrative, McCloud's transition models can be plotted out in the order described above, on a temporal x-axis; the amount of deductive reasoning required (to bring about closure) increasing proportionally with each transition. Thus, a moment-to-moment panel combination requires apparently little closure. Conversely, at the opposite end of the scale, a non-sequitur sequence necessitates much greater reader involvement to secure a corresponding effect. Fig: 2 shows how transition models might be applied to the *Molemen* narrative, which broadly translates as a *subject-to-subject* sequence as the action takes place at a clearly signposted location ("LATER AT TONY'S HOUSE") and cuts between viewpoints showing three separate characters. However, there are two points in the page structure that signal different transition types. In panel three Tony is shown standing at the window so has clearly just got out of bed (action-to-action). The narrative text "THIRTY SECONDS LATER..." drolly

indicates how quickly Tony has disobeyed the warning from his mother to "GO TO SLEEP" and also gives a precise timeframe for the 'action' of getting out of bed and moving to the window. The second point concerns the moment-to-moment transition between panel three and panel four, moving diagonally from strip one to the strip below. According to McCloud's logic, in a moment-to-moment transition, the transferal of meaning from one panel to the next is dependent on a continuous, uninterrupted viewpoint of the subject. In the examples shown in *Understanding Comics*, there are only slight graduations between each panel image (or breakdown) to show the minimal time delay; for example, the time it takes to show a character's facial expression change from a blank countenance to a smile (1994:70). The difference here is that Burns moves the reader a full 180 degrees, from a vantage point behind Tony's shoulder to facing him directly through the window pane, although there appears to be little palpable temporal movement in the actual narrative. In this case, the panel transition dovetails with the strip transition (or ellipsis) mentioned earlier.

Understanding Comics remains an accessible introduction to the treatment of time and space in sequential narratives, remarkable for appropriating the strip format as the means of expression. The six transition models provide a roughhewn template for the close analysis of graphic texts, especially for regular page layouts. However, as can be seen from the *Big Baby* extract, there are inconsistencies in the application. In this case, at what point does a *moment* elongate to become an *action* or how do we quantify the disjuncture from the close of one strip to the panel that signals the start of another? Moreover, as McCloud acknowledges, sequences that contain a substantial textual content, affect the internal rhythm and the rate in which the narrative action is processed (1994:96-98). In some of the visual examples McCloud uses, notably scene-to scene transitions, the inclusion of text is necessary for closure to occur (1994:71). Clearly, there are key semantic differences between reading a piece of text and looking at an image. Even when the style of the artwork leans heavily towards abstraction, and image content may be pared back to basic lines or squiggles that resemble punctuation icons, it is still possible to differentiate between the flat zone of the text and the zone

that delineates the illusion of three-dimensional space. The dispersal of letter formations within a text box requires the reader to order, decipher, conceptualize then relay the corresponding (previously learned) mental concept back to the image. Hence, to answer the question posed earlier, the primacy of the image in the strip format is irrefutable. Text containers require the context of the adjoining image, whereas an image-only sequence can proceed perfectly well without text.

One final point on the transitional/closure ideas put forward by McCloud concerns the application of the aspect-to-aspect transition. Establishing the socio-geographical setting of a storyline is crucial in providing the context for character driven narratives. Rather than create a separate cycle of panels to denote atmosphere or setting, it is more common for strip artists to incorporate aspects of mise-en-scene into the fabric of images; thus, the aspect-to-aspect transition assumes a de-facto auxiliary function in panel sequences. In the seven panels that comprise the *molemen* page Burns provides interior and exterior detail that reflects the white, suburban, American mid-fifties sensibility that provides the ideological context for the narrative. It is this sense of ordered social and geographical space that makes the encroaching horror in the storyline more palpable. Ultimately however, for the social setting to be meaningful, it requires the reader to recognize the visual clues at hand. In this way, comic books provide a fragmentary spatial landscape, a montage of signs, which call upon the subjective 'real life' and mediated experience of the reader to confer meaning and/or evoke empathy. To quote Alain Rey, the comic book page is "the organized space that cheats between the two dimensions of the format and the perceptive suggestion of the world" (Rey, 1978, cited in Groensteen, 2007:12).

Despite constraints concerning scale and structure, the printed graphic page represents a partial and unfixed spatial visuality. This paper has highlighted some of the formal methods by which strip artists counteract or subvert the receptive instability of the medium, namely; the demarcation of the page multiframe, strip ellipsis, utilizing key panel coordinates, motioning narrative

rhythm, controlling the tension between text and image and driving the transitions between one panel and the next. The pre-selection, design and arrangement of the component parts that comprise the page "incarnates comics as a mental form" (Groensteen, 2007:28). There are of course inherent problems with generalizing audience reception and speculating on notions of *closure*. The symbiotic relationship between creator and audience is difficult to quantify, as any reader will naturally bring to bear their own prejudices and knowledge to the practice of reading of a comic book text. Moreover, the audience may be "constituted by those with a vested interest in their reification and analysis" (Dittmer, 2010:224). However, it is clear that the conceptualization of the comic book page is a complex multi-modal activity, with symbolic depth, that requires an acute spatial awareness of visual forms. At their best, graphic narratives articulate the poetics of montage in how we perceive, order and rationalize the spatiality of human experience.

Nick Dodds

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Appendices



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fig 1: from *Curse of the Molemen*
Big Baby Anthology (2007) by Charles Burns.
Copyright: Fantagraphics Books

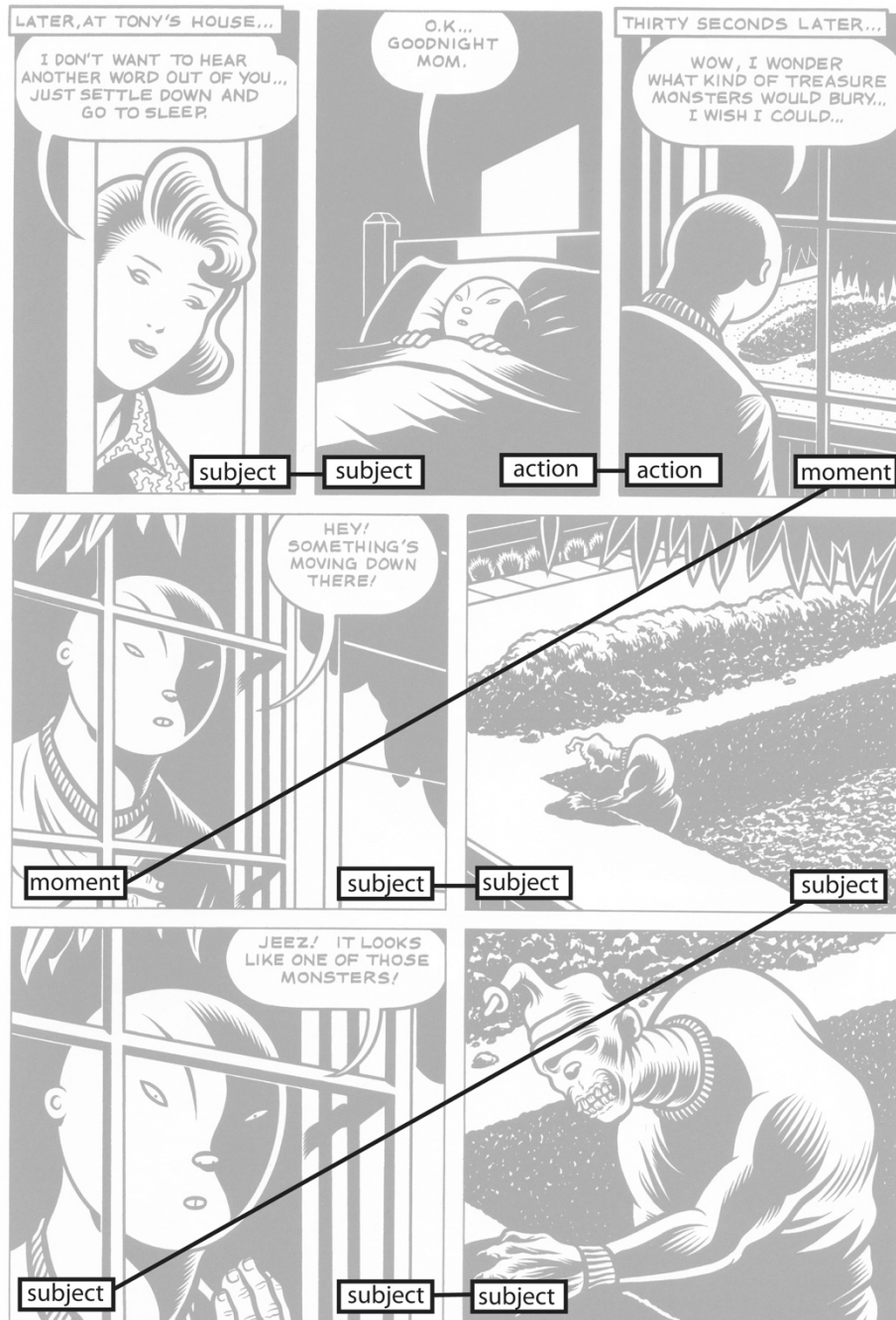


fig 2: The application of Scott McCloud's panel transition models from *Understanding Comics*.

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